

**COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO**

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**AGRICULTURE AND  
OPEN SPACE ELEMENT**

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ADOPTED BY  
THE SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
December 15, 1998  
Resolution No. 98-495



# COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
1: INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1-1
A. Purpose . . . . .	1-1
B. Relationship to Other General Plan Elements . . . . .	1-9
C. How To Use This Document . . . . .	1-11
2: THE AGRICULTURE ELEMENT . . . . .	2-1
A. Agricultural Resources . . . . .	2-1
B. Agricultural Issues . . . . .	2-9
C. Agricultural Goals, Policies, Implementation Measures and Programs . . .	2-16
Agricultural Goals (AG) . . . . .	2-16
Intent . . . . .	2-16
AG1: Support County Agricultural Production . . . . .	2-16
AG2: Conserve Agricultural Resources . . . . .	2-17
AG3: Protect Agricultural Lands . . . . .	2-17
AG4: Encourage Public Education and Participation . . . . .	2-18
Agricultural Policies (AGP) . . . . .	2-18
AGP1: Public Education . . . . .	2-19
AGP2: Public and Private Lands . . . . .	2-19
AGP3: Right-to-Farm Ordinance . . . . .	2-19
AGP4: Agricultural Use of Small Parcels . . . . .	2-20
AGP5: Residential Density . . . . .	2-21
AGP6: Visitor Serving and Retail Commercial Use and Facilities . . . . .	2-22
AGP7: Service Commercial-Type Uses . . . . .	2-22
AGP8: Intensive Agricultural Facilities . . . . .	2-23
AGP9: Soil Conservation . . . . .	2-25
AGP10: Water Conservation . . . . .	2-26
AGP11: Agricultural Water Supplies . . . . .	2-27
AGP12: Pest, Vertebrate, and Weed Management . . . . .	2-28
AGP13: Agricultural Material Composting . . . . .	2-29
AGP14: Agricultural Preserve Program . . . . .	2-31
AGP15: Transfer of Development Credits (TDC) . . . . .	2-33
AGP16: Agricultural Land Conservation Programs . . . . .	2-34
AGP17: Agricultural Buffers . . . . .	2-36
AGP18: Location of Improvements . . . . .	2-38
AGP19: Consolidation of Public and Private Land Holdings . . .	2-38

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
AGP20: Agricultural Land Divisions . . . . .	2-39
AGP21: Minimum Parcel Size Criteria for the Division of Agricultural Lands . . . . .	2-40
AGP22: Major Agricultural Cluster Projects . . . . .	2-44
AGP23: Minor Agricultural Cluster Projects . . . . .	2-47
AGP24: Conversion of Agricultural Land . . . . .	2-50
AGP25: Unique or Sensitive Habitat . . . . .	2-54
AGP26: Streams and Riparian Corridors . . . . .	2-55
AGP27: Natural Area Preserves . . . . .	2-56
AGP28: Major Ecosystems . . . . .	2-57
AGP29: Wildlife Corridors . . . . .	2-58
AGP30: Scenic Resources . . . . .	2-59
AGP31: Recreational Use of Agricultural Lands . . . . .	2-60
AGP32: Trail Access to Public Lands . . . . .	2-61
AGP33: Archaeological and Cultural Sites . . . . .	2-61
AGP34: Historical Resources . . . . .	2-62
 3: THE OPEN SPACE ELEMENT . . . . .	 3-1
A. Open Space Resources . . . . .	3-1
What Are Open Space Lands? . . . . .	3-2
B. Environmental Features . . . . .	3-3
Physical Characteristics . . . . .	3-4
Geomorphic Regions . . . . .	3-4
Geology . . . . .	3-5
Seismicity . . . . .	3-5
Landslides and Other Geologic Hazards . . . . .	3-7
Slope Characteristics . . . . .	3-8
Biological Resources . . . . .	3-8
Regional Habitat Characteristics . . . . .	3-10
The Nipomo Dunes . . . . .	3-10
Estuaries . . . . .	3-10
The Upper Salinas River Valley . . . . .	3-10
The Carrizo Plain . . . . .	3-14
Coastal Streams . . . . .	3-14
Major Vegetative Communities . . . . .	3-14
Habitat Type . . . . .	3-15
Oak Woodlands . . . . .	3-17
Valley Oak Woodland . . . . .	3-17

Chapter

Page

Blue Oak Woodland . . . . .	3-17
Blue Oak-Grey Pine . . . . .	3-17
Coastal Oak Woodlands . . . . .	3-18
Montane Hardwood . . . . .	3-18
Conifer . . . . .	3-18
Shrub (chaparral) . . . . .	3-19
Grassland . . . . .	3-19
Eucalyptus Woodland . . . . .	3-19
Riparian Forest . . . . .	3-19
Coastal Saltmarsh . . . . .	3-20
C. Open Space Issues . . . . .	3-20
What are the Issues Affecting Open Space Lands? . . . . .	3-21
Why Protect Open Space? . . . . .	3-23
D. Open Space Goals, Policies, Implementation Measures and Programs . . .	3-25
Open Space Goals (OSG) . . . . .	3-25
Intent . . . . .	3-25
OSG1: Identify and Protect Open Space . . . . .	3-25
OSG2: Manage Open Space . . . . .	3-26
OSG3: Prevent Urban Sprawl . . . . .	3-26
OSG4: Encourage Public Education and Participation . . . . .	3-26
Open Space Policies (OSP) . . . . .	3-27
OSP1: Public Education . . . . .	3-27
OSP2: Public and Private Development . . . . .	3-28
OSP3: Conservation and Protection by Private Landowners . .	3-29
OSP4: Future Open Space Protection . . . . .	3-29
OSP5: Acquisition of Open Space . . . . .	3-29
OSP6: Management of Public Open Space Lands . . . . .	3-32
OSP7: Consolidation of Public and Private Lands . . . . .	3-38
OSP8: Land Conservation Contracts . . . . .	3-40
OSP9: Transfer of Development Credits (TDC) . . . . .	3-41
OSP10: Land Divisions and Development . . . . .	3-41
OSP11: Conversion of Rural Areas to Urban Lands . . . . .	3-43
OSP12: Conversion of Lands to Small-Lot Rural (Residential Rural and Residential Suburban in LUE) . . . . .	3-45



<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
	OSP13: Establish a Network of Major Ecosystems . . . . .	3-62
	OSP14: Protection and Management of Major Ecosystems . . . . .	3-62
	OSP15: Wildlife Corridors . . . . .	3-63
	OSP16: Habitat Protection . . . . .	3-66
	OSP17: Development Within Unique or Sensitive Habitat . . . . .	3-66
	OSP18: Protection of Streams and Riparian Corridors . . . . .	3-67
	OSP19: Development Within Stream Corridors . . . . .	3-68
	OSP20: Establishment of Natural Area Preserves . . . . .	3-72
	OSP21: Management of Natural Area Preserves . . . . .	3-76
	OSP22: Protection of Significant Marine Resources . . . . .	3-78
	OSP23: Morro Bay Estuary and Watershed . . . . .	3-78
	OSP24: Scenic Corridors . . . . .	3-80
	OSP25: Development and Land Divisions Within Scenic Corridors . . . . .	3-81
	Recreation Areas	
	OSP26: Recreational Uses of Publicly-Owned Open Space . . . . .	3-85
	OSP27: Recreation Opportunities with Private Development . . . . .	3-86
	OSP28: Private Recreation Facilities . . . . .	3-88
	OSP29: Trail Access to Public Lands . . . . .	3-88
	OSP30: Off-Highway Vehicles . . . . .	3-89
	Hazard Areas	
	OSP31: Natural Hazards . . . . .	3-90
	OSP32: Man-made Hazards . . . . .	3-90
	Protection of Archaeological, Cultural and Historical Resources . . . . .	3-91
	OSP33: Protection of Archaeological and Cultural Sites . . . . .	3-92
	OSP34: Protection of Historical Resources . . . . .	3-92

<u>Figures</u>	<u>Page</u>
1-1 Lots Approved by Type of Permit Procedure and Land Use Category . . . . .	1-4
1-2 Land Use Relationships . . . . .	1-13
1-3 Relationship Between Agriculture/Open Space Element Designations and LUE Categories . . . . .	1-15
1-4 Public Lands . . . . .	1-17
2-1 Map of Groundwater Basins . . . . .	2-8

<u>Figures</u>	<u>Page</u>
2-2 Minimum Parcel Size (Acres) for New Land Divisions of Lands Designated Agriculture . . . . .	2-43
2-3 Major Ag Cluster . . . . .	2-45
2-4 Minor Ag Cluster . . . . .	2-48
2-5 Orderly Urban Expansion . . . . .	2-52
3-1 Fault Traces . . . . .	3-6
3-2 Slopes . . . . .	3-9
3-3 State & Federally Listed Animal Species in San Luis Obispo County . . . . .	3-12
3-4 Vegetative Cover of San Luis Obispo County . . . . .	3-15
3-5 Vegetation . . . . .	3-16
3-6 Urban Expansion . . . . .	3-44
3-7 Ecosystem Connectivity . . . . .	3-49
3-8 Edge Effect . . . . .	3-52
3-9 Habitat Patch Size . . . . .	3-53
3-10 Flood Corridor . . . . .	3-57
3-11 Morro Bay Watershed . . . . .	3-60
3-12 Creek Corridor . . . . .	3-69
3-13 Riparian Corridor Protection . . . . .	3-71
3-14 Ecologically Significant Marine Areas . . . . .	3-79

<u>Appendices</u>	<u>Page</u>
A Users Guide . . . . .	A-1
B Natural Areas Plan . . . . .	B-1
C Agricultural Mapping Criteria . . . . .	C-1
D Agricultural Buffer Policies . . . . .	D-1
E Right-to-Farm Ordinance . . . . .	E-1
F Agriculture: Land, Economy, Industry . . . . .	F-1
G Glossary . . . . .	G-1
H Trails Policy . . . . .	H-1
I Cambria's Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan . . . . .	I-1
J Production Agriculture Determination . . . . .	J-1
K Summary of Implementation Measures for the Agriculture and Open Space Element . . . . .	K-1



# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

## A. PURPOSE

### WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

This document is a comprehensive update of the County's 1972 **Open Space Element**. It has been retitled the **Agriculture and Open Space Element** in order to more accurately reflect concerns for both the "agriculture" and "open space" areas of the county. While it is understood that there are many types of agriculture and open space, **the focus of this document is on wisely managing and protecting these important land use resources in San Luis Obispo County.**

### MISSION STATEMENT

In accordance with the County's mission statement which "...seeks to enhance the economic, environmental and social quality of life in San Luis Obispo County...", the mission of this element is to:

- \* **Identify those areas of the county with productive farms, ranches and soils, and establish goals, policies and implementation measures that will enable their long-term stability and productivity; and to**
- \* **Identify open space lands that are worthy of protection for their intrinsic value, and establish goals, policies and implementation measures that will enable the long-term protection of those resources.**

### GOALS

The mission, as it pertains to agricultural resources, is addressed through four agricultural goals discussed in detail in **Chapter 2: The Agriculture Element**, and summarized as follows:

#### **Agricultural Goals (AG):**

**AG 1: Support county agricultural production.**

**AG 2: Conserve agricultural resources.**

**AG 3: Protect agricultural lands.**

**AG 4: Encourage public education and participation.**



Open space resources are also addressed through four open space goals discussed in detail in **Chapter 3: The Open Space Element**, and summarized as follows:

**Open Space Goals (OSG):**

**OSG 1: Identify and protect open space.**

**OSG 2: Manage open space.**

**OSG 3: Prevent urban sprawl.**

**OSG 4: Encourage public education and participation.**

**WHAT ISSUES ARE TO BE ADDRESSED BY THIS ELEMENT?**

This document attempts to identify those issues of special importance to both agricultural and open space resources and strives to balance what, at times, may be competing interests. San Luis Obispo County contains several distinct categories of agriculture and open space, including:

- \*\* soil dependent production agriculture;
- \*\* intensive (but not necessarily soil dependent) agricultural activities such as greenhouses which often provide critical support to other production agriculture;
- \*\* open spaces which warrant special recognition for habitat values or otherwise protect public health, safety or general welfare; and
- \*\* large bodies of water such as local lakes, estuaries and ocean environments.

Each of these distinct categories serve specific functions which may or may not be mutually compatible with another category. However, there are at least two common issues impacting these categories:

1. the steadily increasing numbers of people choosing to settle in the rural regions as opposed to the urban communities; and
2. old land parcels recorded before the State adopted the Subdivision Map Act and/or before the county adopted ordinances governing land use planning.

For the most part, the parcels created by these so called "antiquated subdivisions" remain in private ownership and are, in many instances, capable of development. Many of these old parcels are subdivided on land which might otherwise be better used for production agriculture or for non-agricultural open space purposes.



In 1990, the county embarked on the preparation of a "Rural Settlement Pattern Strategy Study" (Rural Settlement Study) to assist in guiding land use policies addressing growth in the rural areas. Interested readers should review the materials prepared through that study (on file in the county Department of Planning and Building).

There are several important findings from the 1990 Phase I Rural Settlement Study report, including:

1. There are almost as many undeveloped individual assessor parcels in the urban areas (defined by the urban and village reserve lines of the communities) as the total of all individual assessor parcels in the rural areas (outside of the urban and village reserve lines).
2. In rural areas of the county, the existing general plan would allow virtually as many new parcels as already existed in those areas in 1990, potentially resulting in approximately 8,000 new parcels representing roughly a 40 percent increase over what already existed in 1990.
3. More than two-thirds of the parcels that would be created through new subdivision as allowed by the general plan would occur on lands designated Agriculture and Rural Lands by the Land Use Element.

If past trends continue, and subdivisions allowable by the existing general plan are created, the character and use of many rural areas will substantially change. Figure 1-1 shows that 3,591 parcels were created between 1987 and 1998 in the three land use categories (zoning districts) that are most common in the rural areas of the county. These districts are Agriculture, Rural Lands, and Residential Rural. This market for rural lands has the potential for significantly changing the landscape of the county.

**FIGURE 1-1**  
**LOTS APPROVED BY TYPE OF PERMIT PROCEDURE AND LAND USE CATEGORY**

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	TOTAL
<b>AGRICULTURE</b>													
Parcel Maps	13	29	21	16	42	14	6	11	6	13	4	0	175
Tract Maps	0	0	8	0	0	58	0	57	7	0	0	0	130
Certificates of Compliance	42	29	134	21	87	52	69	56	174	324	401	85	1,474
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>1,779</b>
<b>RURAL LANDS</b>													
Parcel Maps	17	18	10	16	7	5	12	2	2	0	2	4	95
Tract Maps	6	8	26	61	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	109
Certificates of Compliance	2	8	2	2	37	0	17	7	10	6	20	15	126
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>330</b>
<b>RESIDENTIAL RURAL</b>													
Parcel Maps	53	83	67	65	75	61	37	10	29	21	17	16	534
Tract Maps	29	147	93	104	345	78	45	0	16	18	0	11	886
Certificates of Compliance	3	7	4	12	4	2	3	0	6	15	4	2	62
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>424</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>1,482</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>597</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>3,591</b>

## IS THIS DOCUMENT REQUIRED?

Yes. All general plans in California must contain an open space element. The State of California, by law, requires each county and city to have a **"comprehensive, long-term general plan for the physical development of the county...that consists of a "...statement of development policies and shall include a diagram or diagrams and text setting forth objectives, principles, standards, and plan proposals."**

A county (or city) general plan must contain seven mandated elements, as follows: Land Use, Circulation, Housing, Conservation, **Open Space**, Safety, and Noise elements. In addition, because we are a coastal county, we must also have a certified Local Coastal Plan.

A county (or city) may also elect to adopt optional elements to the general plan to address issues of local concern. At this writing, San Luis Obispo County has eight optional elements: Seismic Safety, Esthetics, Historic, Recreation, Master Water and Sewer Plan, Offshore Energy, and Energy elements. Rather than adopt a separate optional agriculture element, the Board of Supervisors directed that agricultural issues be included within a combined general plan document due to the critical role of agriculture in San Luis Obispo County.

## WHAT IS THE STATE'S LEGISLATIVE INTENT BEHIND THE REQUIREMENT FOR AN OPEN SPACE ELEMENT?

When the state legislature established the requirement for an Open Space Element, it adopted the following important declaration:

"The Legislature finds and declares as follows:

- (a) That the preservation of open-space land...is necessary not only for the maintenance of the economy of the state, but also for the assurance of the continued availability of land for the production of food and fiber, for the enjoyment of scenic beauty, for recreation and for the use of natural resources.
- (b) That discouraging premature and unnecessary conversion of open-space land to urban uses is a matter of public interest and will be of benefit to urban dwellers because it will discourage non-contiguous development patterns which unnecessarily increase the costs of community services to community residents.
- (c) That the anticipated increase in the population of the state demands that...counties...make plans for the preservation of valuable open-space land and take positive action to carry out such plans by the adoption and strict administration of laws, ordinances, rules and regulations...
- (d) That in order to assure that the interests of all its people are met in the orderly growth and development of the state and the preservation and conservation of its resources,



it is necessary to provide...coordinated plans for the conservation and preservation of open-space land." (Government. Code 65661)

In addition to this declaration, the Legislature also adopted a statement of intent, as follows:

"It is the intent of the Legislature in enacting this article:

- (a) To assure that cities and counties recognize that open-space land is a limited and valuable resource which must be conserved wherever possible.
- (b) To assure that every city and county will prepare and carry out open-space plans which...will accomplish the objectives of a comprehensive open-space program." (Government. Code 65562)

## **DOES STATE LAW DEFINE OPEN SPACE LAND?**

Yes. The state planning law defines open space land as:

**"...any parcel or area of land or water which is essentially unimproved and devoted to an open-space use...as designated on a local...open space plan as any of the following:...open space for the preservation of natural resources...the managed production of resources...for outdoor recreation...for public health and safety..." (Government. Code 65560(b))**

## **WHAT IS THE STATE'S LEGISLATIVE INTENT REGARDING AGRICULTURE?**

The **State Food and Agriculture Code** contains the state legislature's adopted findings regarding agriculture in California:

"The Legislature finds and declares the following:

- (a) Agriculture is the number one industry in California, which is the leading agricultural state in the country.
- (b) Although California's cultivated land accounts for approximately 3 percent of the country's entire supply of farmland, the state has historically produced about 10 percent of the farm cash receipts in the United States.
- (c) California leads the nation in the production of approximately 50 different crops and livestock products.

- (d) The diversity of the state's agriculture is truly impressive, for over 250 different commodities are grown here.
- (e) Family owned farms produce most of the food and fiber produced by the California agricultural industry.
- (f) The economic strength of California's agricultural industry depends on farmers and ranchers being able to profitably market the commodities and products raised.
- (g) A profitable and healthy farming industry must be sustained by a sound natural resource base of soils, water, and air which is developed, conserved, and maintained to ensure sufficient quantities and the highest optimum quality possible."

[Source: Food and Agriculture Code, Article 1, Section 802.]

In support of these findings, the Legislature also adopted the following major principles for agriculture:

- "(a) To increase the sale of crops and livestock products produced by farmers, ranchers, and processors of food and fiber in the state.
- (b) To enhance the potential for domestic and international marketing of California agricultural products through fostering the creation of value additions to commodities and the development of new consumer products.
- (c) To sustain the long-term productivity of the state's farms by conserving and protecting the soil, water, and air which are agriculture's basic resources."

[Source: Food and Agriculture Code, Article 2, Section 821.]

In 1995, the California legislature enacted SB 275, the Agricultural Land Stewardship Program Act of 1995. The Act includes an important statement of legislative intent regarding conservation of agricultural lands, as follows:

- "a. Encourage voluntary, long-term private stewardship of agricultural lands by offering landowners financial incentives.
- b. Protect farming and ranching operations in agricultural areas from nonfarm or nonranch land uses that may hinder and curtail farming or ranching operations.
- c. Encourage long-term conservation of productive agricultural lands in order to protect the agricultural economy of rural communities, as well as that of the state, for future generations of Californians.



- d. Encourage local land use planning for orderly and efficient urban growth and conservation of agricultural land.
- e. Encourage local land use planning decisions that are consistent with the state's policies with regard to agricultural land conservation.
- f. Encourage improvements to enhance long-term sustainable agricultural uses."

[Source: Public Resources Code Section 10202.]

San Luis Obispo County supports this important piece of legislation. It furthers the legislature's statement of legislative intent as expressed for the required Open Space Element of the general plan; it is supportive of the findings and major principles of the Food and Agriculture Code ; and also provides further support to the California Land Conservation Act (the Williamson Act). This program can make grant monies available to pursue a variety of agricultural conservation programs, including the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, land improvement and planning grants, and technical assistance from the State Department of Conservation. These funds could be used to achieve several important goals and policies found in this plan.

## **WHAT IS THE COUNTY'S LEGISLATIVE INTENT IN ADOPTING THIS ELEMENT?**

It is the county's intent that adoption of this **Agriculture and Open Space Element** fully comply with the Declaration as well as the Statement of Intent of California law regarding open space, and with the State agriculture policy found in the Food and Agriculture Code.

Because of the important role of agriculture in San Luis Obispo County, this element also seeks to equally address and balance agricultural and open space issues. While the State defines agriculture as one component of open space for purposes of the general plan, agriculture faces different issues that require different responses. Therefore, **Chapter 2: The Agriculture Element**, and **Chapter 3: The Open Space Element**, strive for a balance between both of these important resources in a combined **Agriculture and Open Space Element** of the county general plan.

## **HOW HAS THIS ELEMENT BEEN PREPARED?**

When the Board of Supervisors authorized the preparation of this element in 1984, they directed staff to work with the Agricultural Liaison Board to prepare this update. Staff then prepared a series of issue papers that were reviewed with the Liaison Board and became the basis for preparation of the early drafts of the plan.

In 1992, a "public review draft" plan was issued. The draft was widely circulated for over a year, during which the Planning Commission held a study session, the Parks and Recreation Commission held a well-attended public hearing, both commissions held a joint study session that was also open

to the public, and four public workshops were held throughout the county. One of the major criticisms was that the draft contained very little in the way of open space policies, and that it did not adequately carry forward the provisions of the 1972 Open Space Element that it was proposed to replace.

In response to the many comments, the public review draft element was extensively rewritten to balance concerns for both agricultural and non-agricultural open space resources. The rewritten plan became the "public hearing draft" that was the subject of public hearings commenced by the County Planning Commission in July, 1995. The Planning Commission completed their public hearings and adopted the "Planning Commission Recommended Agriculture and Open Space Element" in August, 1996.

The element was forwarded to the Board of Supervisors for advertised public hearings that began in the summer of 1997. As the hearings began, there were still a number of unresolved issues in the recommended plan. In an effort to try to resolve them, the Board appointed a 3-member committee to review the document and bring recommendations back for Board consideration. The committee consisted of one representative each from the Agricultural Liaison Board, the Farm Bureau, and the local chapter of the Sierra Club representing the environmental community. The focus of the committee's work was to restructure the element in such a way that it would better achieve the desired balance between protecting both agricultural and open space resources. This draft of the element is the result of the committee's work to reach consensus on the issues.

## **B. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER GENERAL PLAN ELEMENTS**

In response to the issue that protection of agricultural resources needs different policies than the protection of open space resources, this element is prepared as both a mandatory element of the general plan, as well as one of the optional general plan elements. Chapter 2 is the optional Agriculture Element, and Chapter 3 is the mandatory Open Space Element of the County General Plan. In this manner, the combined Agriculture and Open Space Element addresses the differences and similarities in both agricultural and open space resources and how best to conserve and protect those resources, without one taking precedence over the other.

### **DO EACH OF THE GENERAL PLAN ELEMENTS STAND ALONE?**

No. All of the adopted elements, mandated and optional, must be "**consistent**" with each other. When a significant change is made to one element, the change must be consistent with the policies of the other elements, or the other elements must be amended in order to maintain the internal consistency throughout the entire general plan.

The reader of this document should remember that resource issues are also addressed in other general plan elements, such the Conservation Element. As noted in the **Conservation Element**, "...land, air, water, plants, and wildlife are interrelated, and that protection of the environment is vital to human well-being." That element further notes that "the environment includes the total surroundings; the physical, biological and cultural factors, both natural and man made..." and



that “man himself is part of the biological environment.” Thus, many of the issues associated with agricultural and open space resources are further addressed in the **Conservation Element**.

### **DOES ADOPTION OF THIS ELEMENT REZONE PROPERTY?**

No! The plan has been prepared to be consistent with the land use categories (zones) found in the Land Use Element (LUE) wherever possible. Where rezoning might be necessary, it will be handled as described in the following paragraph.

### **ARE FOLLOW-UP REZONINGS RECOMMENDED?**

Yes, in those few instances where adoption of this element would designate an individual property differently from the comparable (zoning) designation in the LUE. Those actions will be considered in separate advertised public hearings before both the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors (and Coastal Commission if in the coastal zone) before any property would be rezoned. Those hearings will also include notice to affected property owners as required by law.

Also, the Land Use Element (LUE) and the Land Use Ordinance (LUO), both coastal and inland, constitute the open space zoning required by state law (Government Code 65110). When adopted, this Agriculture and Open Space Element will become the basis for that zoning. Consequently, future advertised public hearings may be necessary to consider amendments to the LUE and LUO (coastal and inland) to retain internal consistency in all elements of the general plan.

### **DOES THIS ELEMENT SUGGEST CHANGES IN THE LAND USE ELEMENT?**

Yes. The goals, policies and implementation measures in this document do recommend that follow-up actions be considered that would involve amendments to the Land Use Element. This would occur over time and with more study where needed, so that both elements are internally consistent with each other.

Just like the rezoning of individual properties, those follow-up actions must be the subject of separate advertised public hearings by both the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors (and Coastal Commission where appropriate) before any changes are enacted. Those hearings will also include providing notice to affected property owners as required by law.



## **PUTTING ACTION INTO THE AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE ELEMENT**

In the following chapters, there are recommended actions that should be taken as implementation measures to carry out the identified goals and policies. These implementation measures are the **“...action program consisting of specific programs which the legislative body intends to pursue in implementing its open space plan”** that is a required component of the Open Space Element of the county general plan (Government Code Section 65564).

**The adoption of this element does not automatically adopt the recommended implementation measures.** Many of the recommended implementation measures will require future public hearings to adopt amendments to other elements of the county general plan or ordinances. All recommended future amendments will be subject to advertised public hearings that will allow for full and open public discussions of the proposals before adoption.

A methodical implementation of the recommended actions will be needed in order to achieve the vision of this plan. Progress on the recommended implementation measures will depend on direction from the Board of Supervisors as they determine the priority and availability of funding to carry them out. All potential funding sources, both county dollars and outside revenue sources such as grants, will need to be considered since the competing demands for county government resources may make it difficult to achieve every action recommended in the plan.

When the recommended actions are directed towards non-county agencies, those actions will not become effective until such time as the identified agency takes steps to carry out the recommended actions. Adoption of this element cannot automatically implement those actions.

### **C. HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT**

#### **SHOULD I READ THIS DOCUMENT?**

Yes, if you are interested in knowing what county policy is towards agricultural and open space resources. You might start by reading the executive summary to determine what level of detail is of interest to you. Based on your interest, you may then decide to review the appropriate parts or the entire element.

No, if you want to know details about the zoning of a specific piece of property, or the types of uses permitted on a piece of property under the zoning. For that type of information, you should review a copy of the Land Use Element and Land Use Ordinance.

However, if you are interested in amending the zoning of a parcel, or in subdividing property within the existing zoning, you should read this document to understand that such decisions do not exist in a vacuum. Reading this document will acquaint you with the goals and policies to which zoning and subdivision should conform.

## ARE THERE MAPS WITH THIS DOCUMENT?

Yes, there are three maps in the back of the document: Land Use Designations; Open Space Resources; and Public Ownership. The maps visually portray the types of issues addressed in the goals and policies of the element.

In preparing the maps, both natural and cultural factor were considered to determine suitable land use designations. Even though this document addresses agricultural and open space resources separately, it is recognized that they may be intertwined or overlap one another. For instance, a wooded stream corridor may serve several functions, such as recharging the groundwater basin that supports agricultural activities while at the same time controlling flooding, providing wildlife habitat, providing scenic vistas and affording recreational opportunities. If properly managed, these multiple uses may exist in harmony without hindering the ongoing agricultural activities or damaging the stream corridor.

The potential consequences of utilizing the landscape for a given use must be considered. Figure 1-2 illustrates in a very general way the degree of compatibility between various types of land uses and resources. Those compatibilities and conflicts, natural attributes and the potential consequences of the mix of all of these factors, have been taken into account in the preparation of this document and the types of categories shown on the maps.



Figure 1-2

# LAND USE RELATIONSHIPS

LAND USE	COMPATIBILITIES AND CONFLICTS											NATURAL ATTRIBUTES										POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES									
	Urban	Large & Small Lot Rural	Row Crops	Specialty Crops & Forage Land	Mixed Croplands	Dry Croplands	Rangeland	Intensive Recreation	Extensive Recreation	Multi-use Public Lands	Scenic	0 - 15%	16 - 30%	+30%	I, II	III, IV	VI, VII	VIII	Grassland	Wooded Grasslands	Chaparral & Brush	Seismic Hazard	Landslide Hazard	Flood Hazard	Erosion Hazard	Underground Water Supply	Land Disturbance	Air Pollution	Water Pollution	Environmental Damage	
URBAN		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
LARGE & SMALL LOT RURAL	X																														
ROW CROPS	X																														
SPECIALTY CROPS & FORAGE LANDS	X																														
MIXED CROPLANDS	X																														
DRY CROPLANDS	X																														
RANGELAND	X																														
INTENSIVE RECREATION	X																														
EXTENSIVE RECREATION	X																														
MULTI-USE PUBLIC LANDS	X																														
SCENIC	X																														
	●	○	×	—	COMPATIBLE	SOMEWHAT COMPATIBLE	INCOMPATIBLE	NOT APPLICABLE																							
	S	M	C																												

## HOW DO THE MAPS IN THIS ELEMENT RELATE TO THE MAPS IN THE LAND USE ELEMENT?

As noted earlier, the maps in this document do not zone property. As previously noted in the paragraph discussing follow-up rezonings, those actions will need to be advertised for public hearings before changing any zoning on property. The California Coastal Commission will also have to hold public hearings and approve any zoning actions on properties located in the coastal zone. Wherever possible, this element has been prepared to be consistent with the Land Use Element (LUE), and it is the LUE that applies zoning to individual properties.

Figure 1-3 shows the relationship between the map categories in this element and the corresponding land use categories (zoning) in the LUE. In some cases, the land use designations in this element include all lands in the corresponding LUE category. In other cases, the designation in this element includes only some lands in the corresponding LUE category, depending on the location and use of a particular site.

The following is a description of each of the three maps included in this plan.

### Map #1: Land Use Designations

#### Agriculture

This designation includes many different croplands and grazing lands that are individually and collectively important to the local agricultural economy. Also, all lands covered by Williamson Act agricultural preserve contracts are included in this map designation. A more detailed description of agricultural lands can be found in Chapter 2, The Agriculture Element, and Appendix C contains a more detailed explanation of the criteria used in mapping the Agriculture designation in this element.

#### Large - Lot Rural

This designation is applied to privately-owned properties that have limited agricultural potential and where rural residences are the primary use on 20 to 320 acre parcels. This designation generally corresponds to the Rural Lands category in the LUE, but may also include some areas in the Recreation land use category that are developed with privately-operated recreational uses on large acreage.

There are several purposes for this designation, including: very low density rural development in areas of limited agricultural potential recognizing that such uses will be compatible with agricultural uses; protection of open space, watershed and wildlife habitat; maintenance of low population densities in rural areas; and maintaining a clear distinction between the urban/village areas and the surrounding rural areas.



FIGURE 1-3

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGRICULTURE/OPEN SPACE ELEMENT  
DESIGNATIONS AND LUE CATEGORIES

LUE Category <sup>4</sup>	Agriculture and Open Space Element Designation <sup>1</sup>				
	Ag <sup>2</sup>	Large-Lot Rural	Multi-Use Public <sup>2</sup>	Small-Lot Rural <sup>2</sup>	Urban Lands <sup>3</sup>
AG	X				X
RL		X			
REC		C	C		X
RR				X	
RS				X	X
RSF					X
RMF					X
O/P					X
CR					X
CS					X
IND					X
PF			C		X
OS		C	C		X

<sup>1</sup> These designations correspond to the LUE categories in this table where indicated with an "X" or a "C." An "X" means that the given Agriculture and Open Space Element designation in this plan includes all lands in the corresponding LUE category. A "C" means that the given Agriculture and Open Space Element designation may include lands in the corresponding LUE category, depending on the location and use of the particular site.

<sup>2</sup> Applies only within rural areas (outside of urban and village reserve lines).

<sup>3</sup> Applies to areas within urban and village reserve lines as well as some areas planned for commercial, industrial and other non-agricultural uses outside of urban and village reserve lines.

<sup>4</sup> Land Use categories (zoning) defined in the Land Use Element of the County General Plan: AG = Agriculture; RL = Rural Lands; REC = Recreation; RR = Residential Rural; RS = Residential Suburban; RSF = Residential Single Family; RMF = Residential Multi-Family; O/P = Office and Professional; CR = Commercial Retail; CS = Commercial Service; IND = Industrial; PF = Public Facilities; OS = Open Space.

### **Small - Lot Rural**

This designation is characterized by residential uses but may also include scattered agricultural specialty uses, part-time agricultural activities and ranchettes. The designation corresponds to the Residential Rural land use category in the LUE, and may also include some areas in the Residential Suburban category where that category is already located outside or urban and village reserve lines.

The purpose of the Small-Lot Rural designation is to provide for low density residential development and limited non-residential uses that maintain the rural and open landscape in areas where agricultural uses are not sustainable or are clearly secondary uses. The designation includes existing developed areas, rural subdivisions where development of residential uses is appropriate, and intervening areas that should be consolidated for rural residential use.

### **Multi-Use Public Lands**

Lands owned and administered by federal, state and local government agencies are included in this map designation, along with major land holdings owned by non-profit land conservation organizations. The Multi-Use Public Lands designation includes many properties that are included in the LUE categories of Recreation, Open Space and Public Facilities. Many of these lands are important for their forest, watershed, scenic and recreational resources.

Figure 1-4 shows the approximate acreage and proportions of the county land area under the jurisdiction of public agencies, including government agencies and non-profit land conservation organizations. All together, these lands account for about 25 percent of the total county land area.

### **Urban Lands**

This designation includes all areas within the existing urban and village reserve lines shown in the LUE, as well as areas outside those lines that are already developed with or committed to future urban-types of development for commercial, industrial, recreational, residential, or other non-agricultural uses.

**FIGURE 1-4  
PUBLIC LANDS**

<b>Government Jurisdiction<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>% of Co. Area</b>
Los Padres National Forest (U.S. Department of Agriculture)	252,900	11.90
Bureau of Land Management (BLM, U.S. Department of the Interior)	181,200	8.50
Camp Roberts (U.S. Department of Defense)	26,000	1.20
Monterey County Water Agency	18,000	0.85
State Highways and County Roads	13,000	0.61
CA Department of Parks and Recreation	14,500	0.68
CA Department of Fish and Game	7,500	0.35
The Nature Conservancy <sup>2</sup>	6,100	0.29
S.L.O. County Flood Control and Water Conservation District	6,700	0.32
Miscellaneous (estimated) <sup>3</sup>	4,400	0.21
S.L.O. County Parks	12,400	0.58
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>542,700</b>	<b>25.57</b>

<sup>1</sup> Does not include incorporated cities.

<sup>2</sup> The Nature Conservancy manages a total of roughly 185,000 acres in the County.

<sup>3</sup> Includes Cal-Poly University, Cuesta Collete, California Mens Colony.

## Map #2: Open Space Resources

### Sensitive and Scenic Areas

This designation is applied to areas of natural resources and features that have environmental, scenic, archaeological, historical, passive recreational, scientific and educational values. Many of these areas are already identified in the LUE as existing Sensitive Resource Area (SRA) combining designations (overlay zones). Each mapped resource is identified in the map legend so as to identify the type of resource: (H) areas of unique of sensitive plant or animal habitat; (St) streams and riparian corridors; and (Sc) areas of scenic resources. However, there is **no implied or explicit right of public access to areas designated as sensitive and scenic.**



### Recreation Areas

These areas and features contain existing or potential recreational resources that make up a significant portion of the open space areas of the county. These include: federal lands such as the Los Padres national Forest or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) ownerships; State parks and beaches; major County parks; and other recreational areas and facilities. The map legend identifies each of these resources by name.

### Hazard Lands

This designation is applied to those areas of the county that need special management in order to reduce or eliminate threats to public health, safety and welfare. These lands are both publicly and privately owned and, except for fire hazard lands, reflect the corresponding combining designations already identified in the Land Use Element combining designation overlay zones (see Framework for Planning, Part I of the LUE, for a detailed discussion of each). However, there is **no implied or explicit right of public access to areas designated as hazard lands**.

**Flood Hazard:** Flood-prone areas subject to inundation from a 100-year flood event, based on available data from various federal, state, or local agencies. It also includes flood elevations of existing major water bodies such as lakes and reservoirs.

**Geologic Hazard:** Areas covered by the Geologic Study Area (GSA) combining designation as identified in the State's Alquist-Priolo Fault Hazards Act as "special studies zone;" areas within urban and village reserve lines subject to "moderately high to high" landslide risk or liquefaction potential (see the Seismic Safety Element); and lands outside urban reserve lines subject to high landslide risk potential (see Seismic Safety Element).

**Fire Hazard:** Areas classified by the California Department of Forestry (CDF) as having "very high" or "high" potential for range, brush and forest fires based on the type of plant community. The "very high" classification is applied to chaparral; the "high" classification is applied to north coastal scrub, foothill woodland, and juniper/oak woodland.

## **Map #3: Public Ownership**

The map designation of Multi-use Public Lands identifies lands owned and administered by federal, state and local government agencies, as well as major land holdings owned by non-profit land conservation organizations. These properties correspond to LUE categories of Recreation, Open Space and Public Facilities. As with the areas shown on map #2, Open Space Resources, there is **no implied or explicit right of public access** to all lands under public ownership or ownership of various non-profit organizations.



Many of these publicly owned lands serve a variety of uses in addition to providing the benefits of open space. In many instances, the mere fact that the public ownership is extensive in area results in such benefits as providing wildlife habitat, important watershed, and a visual amenity that contributes to the overall rural character of the county.

## **HOW DOES THIS ELEMENT APPLY TO PROPERTY?**

In order to find out how this plan applies to a particular property or area of the county, follow these steps:

1. Locate the property or area on the Land Use Designations map and the Open Space Resources map found in the pocket at the back of the document (also on file in the county Department of Planning and Building).
2. If the property or area is designated Agriculture on the Land Use Designations map, refer to Chapter 2 for goals, policies and implementation measures applicable to agricultural lands.
3. If the property or area is used for production agriculture and is zoned other than Agriculture on the Land Use Designations map, refer to Chapter 2 for goals and the policies and implementation measures of AGP 24 through AGP 34.
4. If the property or area is included in one of the designations on the Open Space Resources map, refer to Chapter 3 for goals, policies and implementation measures applicable to open space lands.
5. If the property or area includes a watercourse shown by a solid or broken blue line on the latest 7.5 minute U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle maps, the policies regarding streams and riparian corridors may apply. Refer to AGP 26 for the applicable policies and implementation measures when these resources are located on agricultural lands, and OSP 18 and 19 for the applicable policies and implementation measures when these resources are located in open space lands.
6. If the implementation measures included in this element recommend a general plan amendment that would convert lands from the designations shown in either this element or the Land Use Element of the general plan, see the land conversion criteria found in AGP 24 if the conversion involves agricultural land, and OSP 11 and 12 if the conversion involves the conversion of open space lands.

To help use this element, a users guide directing you to portions of the plan by topic can be found in Appendix A.

## LANGUAGE

For purposes of this general plan element, all references to the Land Use Element (LUE), Framework for Planning of the LUE and the Land Use Ordinance (LUO) are also construed to mean the Land Use Element and Local Coastal Plan, coastal Framework for Planning and the Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance (CZLUO), respectively, unless otherwise specified.

## DEFINITIONS OF GOALS, POLICIES, IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES AND PROGRAMS

The goals, policies, implementation measures and programs in this element are intended to serve as an educational resource for projects that require only ministerial approval. For discretionary projects, projects that need a public hearing, the element provides guidance and a range of alternatives for achieving the stated goals. The goals, policies, implementation measures and programs contained in this element provide the foundation for reviewing development projects for consistency with the general plan.

The following definitions identify the differences between goals, policies, implementation measures and programs.

**Goals:** A general expression of community values, an ideal future result or condition, based on public health, safety, or general welfare. Goals provide the vision statement of what is the consensus of ideals to be strived for after adoption of this element.

**Policies:** More specific than goals, policies are statements that guide decision making. They are based on the information gathered and analyzed during the process of developing this element.

**Implementation Measures:** Recommended measures that may consist of a series of actions, including such things as future amendments to other components of the county general plan or ordinance code, specific standards that should be applied to the review of development projects, or follow--up studies or programs that should be undertaken in order to carry out the desired goals and policies. Recommended implementation measures may also include actions that are suggested to be undertaken by other county departments, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, or private parties.

**Programs:** Actions that may be initiated by the county or other public agencies to achieve specific community objectives. Because programs are recommended actions rather than mandatory requirements, county implementation should be based on consideration of community needs, support for the program, its related cost and available funding.



## CHAPTER 2: THE AGRICULTURE ELEMENT

### A. AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Fertile soils and ground water resources, combined with moderate climate, form the essential ingredients for agriculture. Examples include the rich irrigated croplands of the Arroyo Grande and Cienega Valleys, the award winning wines made from the vineyards of the Edna Valley and the Paso Robles area, the orchards in the Nipomo Valley, the extensive dry land farming of the north county, and the cattle grazing lands in the coastal hills and interior valleys. These are but some of the unique, diverse and valuable agricultural resources to be found in San Luis Obispo County.

While it is understood that there are many types of agriculture and many facets to the agricultural industry, **the focus of this document is on the land resource as the most important resource to the long-term protection of agriculture in San Luis Obispo County.**

### WHAT IS AGRICULTURAL LAND?

The following general description of the main types and uses of agricultural land in this county were developed in consultation with the County Agricultural Commissioner and the Agricultural Liaison Board as best describing the types of agricultural lands in San Luis Obispo County. The descriptions form the basis for the system used in this Agriculture and Open Space Element to determine which lands should be included in the Agriculture category shown on the land use categories map in the pocket at the back of the document. this includes land designated (zoned) Agriculture in the Land Use Element and in this element, as well as other lands being used for production agriculture.

It should be noted that any lands that are under Williamson Act agricultural preserve contracts have been automatically included in the Agriculture category shown on the map in this element. The validity of how these lands qualify for preserve status is not being questioned here. If there is any question as to whether a particular site or property ownership should continue to be included in a Williamson contract, that review will occur under the terms of the county's "Rules of Procedure to Implement the California Land Conservation Act of 1965" as adopted by the county Board of Supervisors.

In the following descriptions of agricultural lands, the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) land capability rating of soils from Class I through VIII generally reflects the quality of soils for various agricultural uses. A general description of these soil classes is found in the next section of this chapter. A more detailed description of agricultural land and an explanation of the criteria used in mapping agricultural lands in this plan are contained in Appendix C.

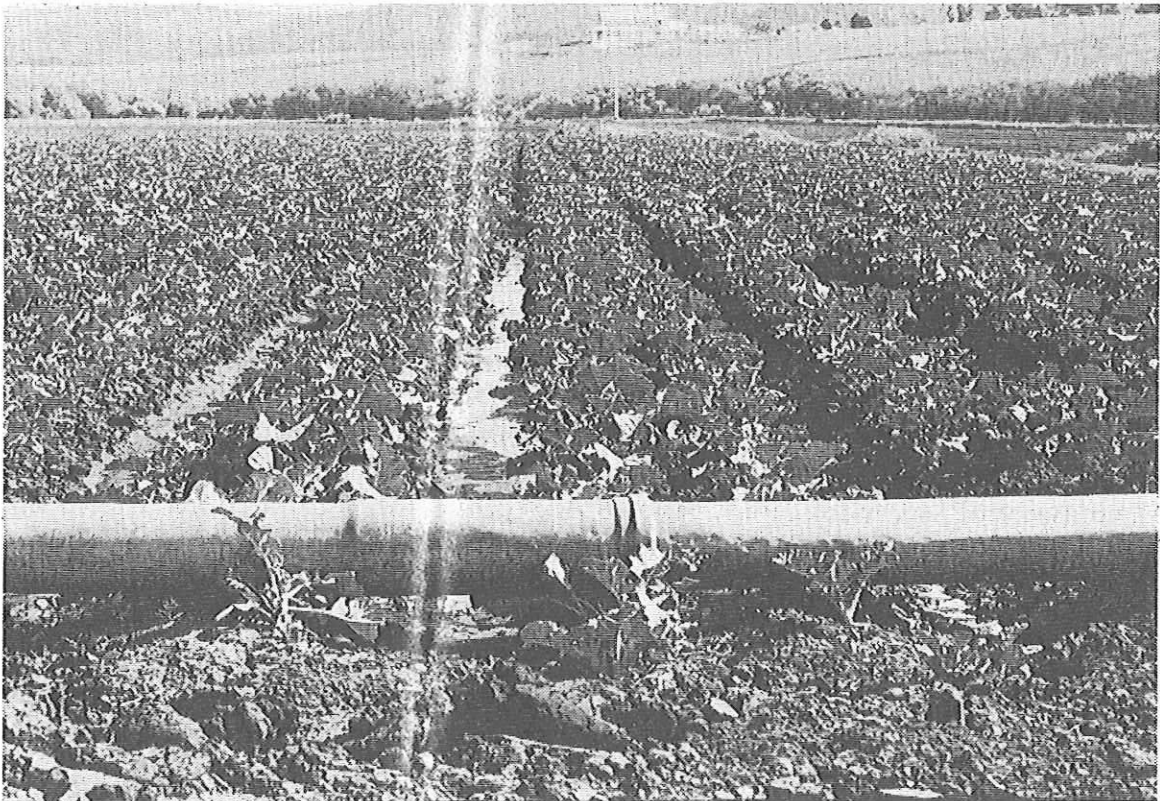


## **Irrigated Lands**

**Row Crops Terrain and Soils:** These lands are characterized by various types of vegetables, seed crops, orchards, and other irrigated specialty crops. In valley bottom lands, uses included irrigated field crops and other irrigated specialty crops. Property sizes generally range from 10 acres to hundreds of acres. The topography of these areas consists of nearly level valley bottom lands. The soils are mainly in land capability Classes I and II, but may include some Class III land that has been traditionally or is currently used for row crop production.

These areas support the most intensive farming. The farming operations involve labor-intensive use of equipment and chemicals and much vehicle traffic. They are often close to populated areas because these lands have historically been the easiest to develop. Partly because of that, these areas need special recognition to assure that the land will remain in agricultural use.

**Specialty Crops and Forage Lands:** These areas are characterized by irrigated orchards and vineyards such as wine grapes, avocados, citrus, and apples. Irrigated uses such as alfalfa and pasture may also be found in these areas. The topography is gently rolling and rolling, on slopes between five and 30 percent. The soils consist mainly of Land Capability Classes III and IV. Property sizes generally range from 20 to a few hundred acres.





## **Dry Farm Lands**

Dry land farming covers a broad range of properties that are primarily cultivated for an annual crop, but also may include some orchard operations. Parcels are normally large in order to be productive units. Farming activities are seasonal. Dry farm lands are divided into two types of croplands, mixed croplands and dry croplands, described below.

**Mixed Croplands:** Mixed croplands consist of two different types of terrain and crops. One type of mixed cropland is found in valleys with good soils but insufficient water for major irrigated uses. Such areas are characterized by mixed agricultural uses such as dry farm grain and hay and scattered irrigated crops. The other type of mixed cropland is found in areas of higher than average rainfall such as the easterly slopes of the Santa Lucia Range where dry farm orchards and some vineyards occur.

Mixed croplands are characterized by dry farm orchards and vineyards and specialty or high value field crops. The topography of these cropland areas typically range from flat to rolling on slopes between zero and 30 percent. The soils consist mainly of Land Capability Classes III and IV. Property sizes generally range from 40 acres to several hundred acres.

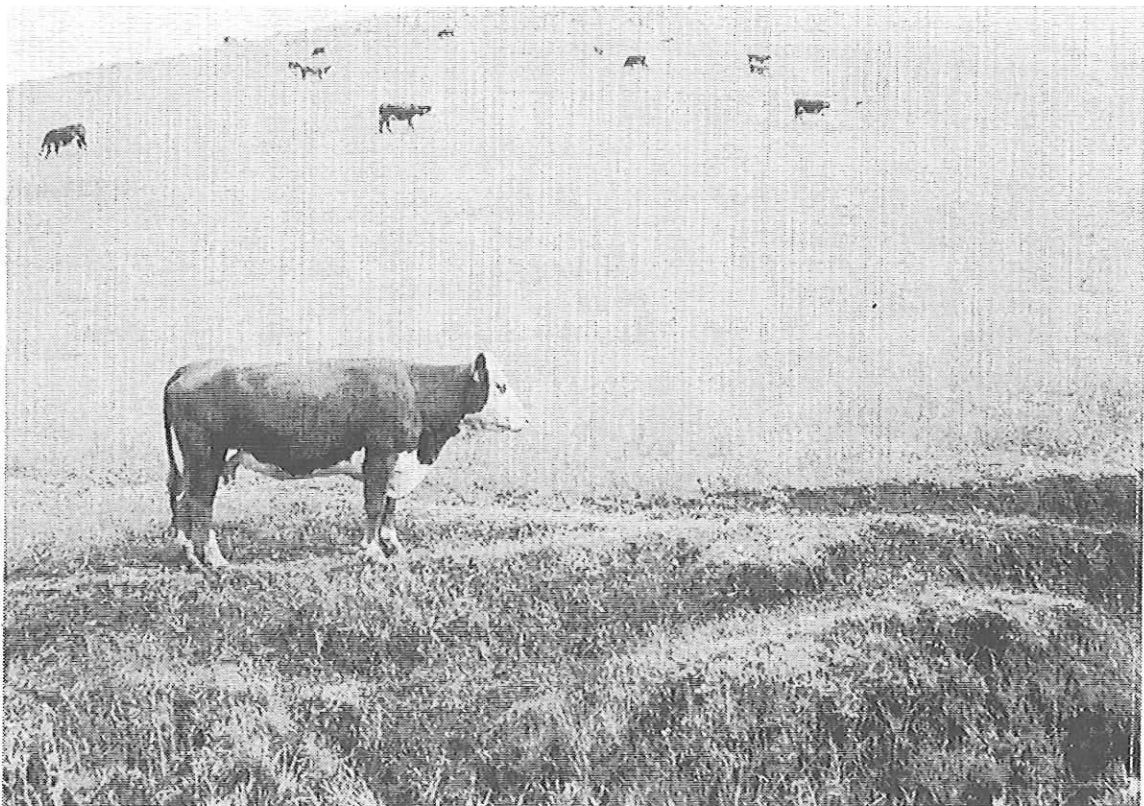




**Dry Croplands:** These areas are characterized by grain and hay production that is widespread in the northeastern part of the county. Barley, wheat and oat hay are the principal crops. Other crops include dry beans and safflower. Dry croplands may also include grain stubble fields and intervening non-cultivated areas that provide seasonal forage for livestock. The topography of these areas is generally flat to rolling on slopes between zero and 30 percent. The soils consist mainly of Land Capability Classes III and IV. Class VI land has also been commonly used for grain production. Property sizes generally range from 80 to several thousand acres.

### **Rangelands for Grazing**

Grazing lands account for a large percentage of privately owned land in the county. Cattle ranching is the predominant use on these lands. The topography is mainly rolling and on steep slopes between 30 and 75 percent. Rangelands may also include small intervening valleys and ridgetops that have limited use or potential as farmland. The soils consist mainly of Land Capability Classes IV, VI and VII, but may also contain small intervening areas of other land capability classes. Property sizes generally range from 100 acres to thousands of acres, depending on the carrying capacity of the rangelands.





## SOILS

As can be seen from the above description of the types of agricultural lands, soil characteristics are critical for agriculture. An understanding of the soils and their properties is an essential factor in developing appropriate agricultural land use patterns and policies. Soils, coupled with climatic conditions and the availability of water, largely determines whether agriculture is feasible and, if so, what kind of crops are possible.

To date, the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) has completed detailed soil surveys for the northern and coastal portions of the county, as well as the Cuyama Valley area that was included in a soil survey for Santa Barbara County. A survey has not yet been completed for the eastern Carrizo Plain area.

Each of the NRCS soil survey reports contains a general soil map that depicts 14 or 15 soil units that have a distinct pattern of soils, relief and drainage that represent a unique natural landscape. A copy of each of the three general survey maps are included in Appendix C of this document. Persons interested in more detailed information should contact the nearest NRCS office. Individual property owners who wish specific information about their property should contact the NRCS and review the detailed mapping in each of the soil surveys, or consider having detailed soils analyses prepared for their property.

The following is a general description of the eight soil capability classes as defined by the NRCS, followed by a brief description of the type of crops that may be typically found on those soils in San Luis Obispo County. Irrigation capability is required to be designated as Class I or II soil in the following descriptions. These irrigated soils are commonly referred to as "prime soils." See Appendix C for a more detailed explanation of the crop descriptions and mapping criteria that were used in the preparation of this document.

**Class I** soils have few limitations that restrict their use. These soils are typically used for vegetables, seed crops, orchards, and other irrigated specialty crops and irrigated field crops.

**Class II** soils have minor to moderate limitation that reduce the choice of plants or that require moderate conservation practices. Uses are very similar to those found on Class I soils.

**Class III and IV** soils have moderate to severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, or that require special conservation practices, or both. In some situations, the Class III soils may be used for some of the crop types that are typically found on Class I and II soils, but are more typically used for specialty crops, forage lands, mixed croplands, and dryland field crops. Irrigated Class IV soils are commonly used for vineyards.

**Class V** soils are not likely to erode but have other limitations, impractical to remove, that limit their use.

Class VI soils have severe limitations that make them generally unsuitable for cultivation. These soils have commonly been used for rangeland and dryland grain production.

Class VII soils have very severe limitations that make them unsuitable for cultivation. These lands are primarily used as rangelands for grazing.

Class VIII soils and landforms have limitations that nearly preclude their use for commercial crop production. However, some grazing occurs on these lands.

The conservation of our soil resources is essential to the future of the county. Unfortunately, a combination of actions are constantly occurring that have an adverse effect on this resource. Soil erosion is occurring due to natural processes, but also due to man's actions on the land through urbanization, inappropriate removal of vegetation, overgrazing, cultivation of steep slopes, and the continuing development of rural properties where landowners are not aware of sound conservation practices.

The **Conservation Element** of the county general plan addresses soil resources in more detail and contains a number of recommendations for soil conservation. Of particular importance to this Agriculture and Open Space Element are the following policies found in the Conservation Element:

- “5. Urban development on prime agricultural land should be avoided. Agricultural zoning should be applied to lands worthy of agricultural preservation to insure that agricultural uses will continue. Agricultural contracts under the Land Conservation Act should be made available whenever possible and use of contracts on qualified properties should be encouraged...
6. Strict standards should be used to prevent unwise grading in the County. Established grading standards should be re-examined; efforts should be made to improve County grading requirements and policies...
8. Removal of groundcover in advance of development should be controlled...
9. Proper standards for construction of drainage facilities should be established. The alteration of natural drainage patterns should be minimized...
11. Development of areas having fragile soils should be discouraged.
13. Overgrazing should be discouraged, and good grazing practices should be encouraged through advisory and incentive programs.



15. Conversion of grazing land to cultivated land should be avoided in areas susceptible to severe soil erosion...Lands officially designated as key ecological areas should be preserved."

[Source: Environment Plan, Conservation Element, 1974.]

## HYDROLOGY

In the relatively arid climate of San Luis Obispo County, water is a valuable resource that is available in limited quantities. There is a fine balance between available supplies and various demands. The county should, within the limits of its authority, ensure that actions by individuals or agencies are consistent with maintaining this balance. Individuals and agencies should also be encouraged to take actions that will enhance this equation by increasing supplies or reducing demands. This balance between supplies and demands can be strengthened if, through the review of development proposals that have the potential for adversely affecting the water balance, appropriate mitigation measures are established, based on the following considerations:

1. Storage of water in or under the watershed should be maximized, thereby minimizing discharges that are lost out of the watershed.
2. Recharge of groundwater basins should be preserved and enhanced by protecting stream bed gravels that are a major source of recharge from sediment deposition. Other alluvial areas should be protected from impervious surfaces or compaction.
3. Water that is extracted from storage should be properly used in a manner that maximizes its beneficial use and that minimizes evaporative losses.

In addition to the above concerns for water quantity, water quality is equally important. Therefore, water that is targeted for groundwater recharge or surface impoundment should be protected from excessive nutrient and salt loading.

### Surface Water

Reservoirs fed by surface waters provide roughly 40 percent of the water supply for the county. There are four major rivers in the county: Salinas, Nacimiento, Cuyama and Santa Maria rivers. Lesser streams include Santa Rosa, Chorro, San Luis Obispo and Arroyo Grande creeks. There are also numerous wetlands located in various areas of the county. There are several major watersheds, including the Salinas River system in the central and much of the eastern portion of the county, and the Cuyama Valley which includes portions of Santa Barbara, Kern and Ventura counties.

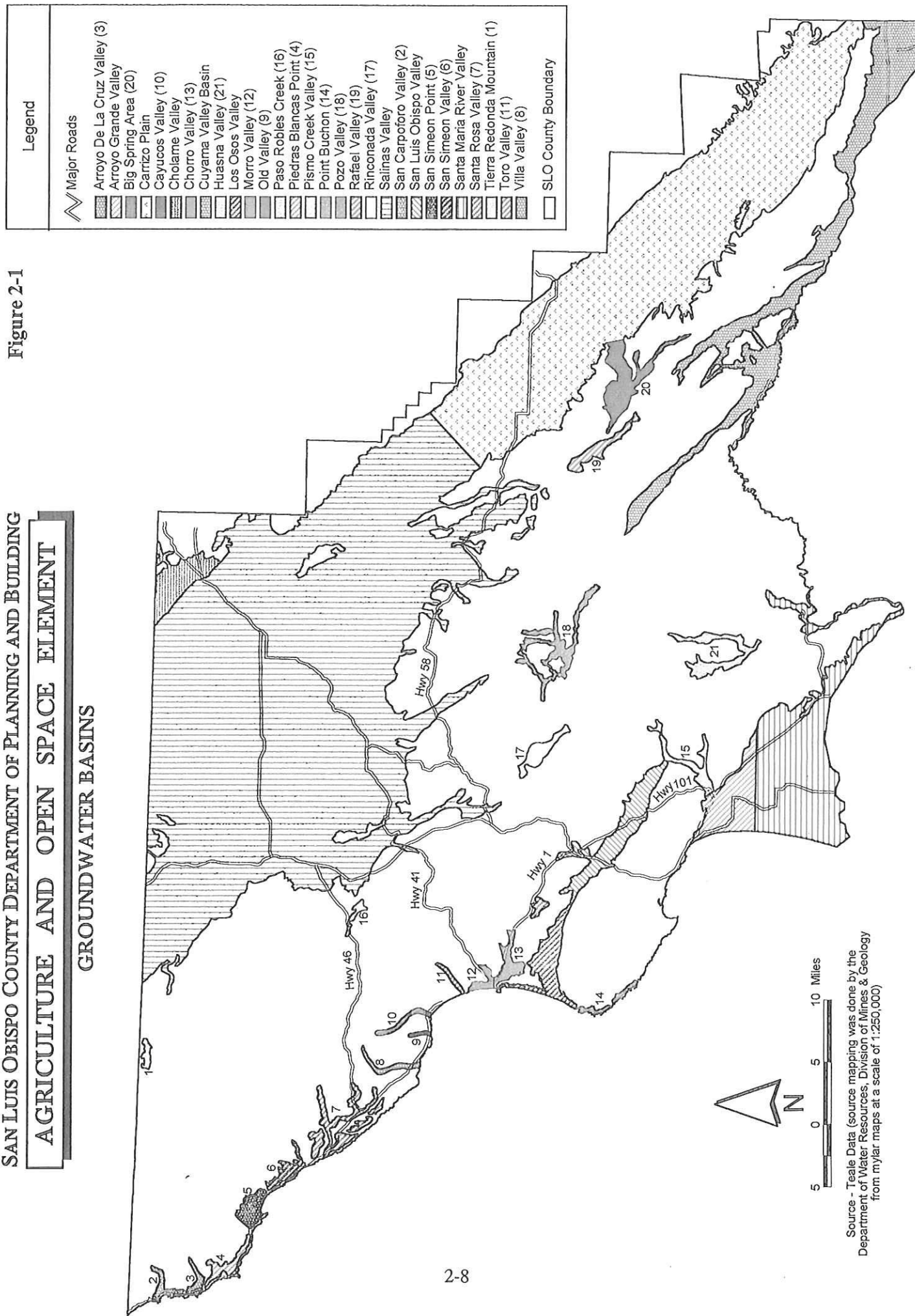


SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND BUILDING

AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

GROUNDWATER BASINS

Figure 2-1



Source - Teale Data (source mapping was done by the Department of Water Resources, Division of Mines & Geology from mylar maps at a scale of 1:250,000)





## **Groundwater**

Groundwater is found within younger alluvium deposited in river valleys, and older alluvium and marine sediments. The small coastal groundwater basins are generally composed of younger deposits, while many of the larger inland basins also contain older alluvium. These groundwater basins provide about 60 percent of the water supply for the county.

The California State Department of Water Resources (DWR) has identified San Luis Obispo County as part of the Central Coastal Hydrologic Study Area (HSA), which includes San Benito and Monterey counties to the north and Santa Barbara County to the south. A total of 40 groundwater basins were identified in this multi-county study area, of which 29 groundwater basins are wholly or partly within San Luis Obispo County. Figure 2-1 shows the groundwater basins in the county. There are four large groundwater basins covering hundreds of square miles each: Paso Robles, Carrisa Plain, Cuyama Valley and Santa Maria basins. There are 20 smaller basins covering less than 50 square miles each, such as: Arroyo Grande Valley-Nipomo Mesa, San Luis Obispo Valley and Chorro Valley.

## **B. AGRICULTURAL ISSUES**

### **WHY PROTECT AGRICULTURAL LANDS?**

- \*\* The State of California, through the Food and Agriculture Code and State planning law, has found the preservation of agricultural lands to be of major importance to the future well being of the people of California.
- \*\* It is the policy of San Luis Obispo County to protect and encourage agricultural operations as stated in the county general plan and in the right-to-farm ordinance.
- \*\* There is a finite amount of land with the necessary characteristics that will enable the production of food and fiber, the basic necessities of life.
- \*\* Once agricultural land is converted to non-agricultural use, it is virtually impossible to remove the non-agricultural use and convert the land back to agricultural production.
- \*\* The agricultural industry is a major component of the San Luis Obispo County economy.
- \*\* Retaining land resources keeps options open for future agricultural activities as the industry changes over time.
- \*\* Agriculture provides productive open space that contributes to the rural character of the county.

- \*\* Retaining land in agriculture can have a secondary benefit of retaining other open space resources such as riparian lands, important habitat, and scenic quality.
- \*\* The open space qualities of agricultural lands contribute to the high quality of life and add to the livability of our communities.
- \*\* Broad expanses of agricultural land can contribute to the long-term protection of important ecosystems and natural communities.
- \*\* A strong commitment to agriculture will reduce the pressure to convert productive lands to urban uses, thereby reducing urban sprawl.

Protecting agricultural lands is of long-term importance to the county, state and nation. There is continuing and increasing pressure to convert the rural areas of the county to rural residential homesites. Agriculture can periodically find itself in a poor economic position due to market fluctuations, or adverse natural conditions such as a drought. However, the strong market for rural land in this county and many other parts of the state is a more long-term threat. This is being driven, in part, by the difficulties presented by estate planning and inheritance taxes that often lead to the parcelization of agricultural lands. The pressure for conversion of these lands is also being driven by the desire of many people to escape the pressures of living in the major urban centers. Conversion is also being driven by the desirability of enjoying a rural lifestyle while still being able to connect to the business world through the ever-increasing technical advances of the telecommunications age.

The 1990 Rural Settlement Study Phase I Report evaluated development activity in relation to the agricultural lands that have been identified through the State Farmland Mapping Program. Based on that review, it is important to protect agricultural land now because:

- \*\* Over 90 percent of the County's "prime" agricultural land occurs in areas that have been experiencing development activity through tract maps, parcel maps and residential building permits;
- \*\* Almost all of the "unique" agricultural land is located in areas experiencing development;
- \*\* Over 60 percent of the lands of "local importance" occur in areas where development activity has occurred; and
- \*\* Lands defined as being of local "potential" have experienced the most development. Because these lands are widely dispersed around the county, it makes it difficult to identify areas that could be easily protected in the future except through a careful review of individual projects on a case-by-case basis.

If the protection of agricultural land is not given a high priority now, the industry may not be able to withstand the pressure to convert to other uses and move on. Farmers who have spent



generations on the land and who want to see their families continue to enjoy that lifestyle, and who have a commitment to producing food and fiber for the rest of society, may no longer be able to withstand the pressure to sell the family farm. The long-term result will be the loss of productive lands for future generations, as well as the loss of the history and lifestyle that provides the rural character that is San Luis Obispo County.



## **What are the Issues Affecting Agricultural Lands?**

- \* The county's agricultural industry is constantly changing and evolving.**

While more traditional land uses prevail in the more arid eastern portions of the county, thousands of acres have been removed from production as part of the federal conservation reserve program. While it is possible that these acres may eventually be returned to agricultural production, it is also possible that they may not return to their prior use of dry farm grain, but instead be put into some other form of agricultural activities. Areas closer to the coast are being affected by population growth and a trend towards more intensive agricultural uses. As the type of agriculture changes, whether it be from dry land farming to vineyards, or a shift to specialty crops, there is a need to establish policies governing agricultural land use which are flexible and can respond to changing needs and opportunities.

- \* Population growth can create pressure for speculative investment in agricultural land for conversion to non-agricultural uses.**

The county's moderate year-round climate, quality educational facilities and other amenities create a desirable environment that draws people to the area and create conflicts at the urban/agriculture interface. Antiquated, small-lot subdivisions typify these problems. These old subdivisions underlying rural and agricultural areas are sold as individual lots and developed as rural homesites in areas without adequate public services. These rural homesites increase conflicts with surrounding agricultural operations in numerous ways.

- \* A number of parcels in the Agriculture land use category are too small to support most production agricultural uses.**

There are approximately 2,750 parcels that are smaller than 20 acres, totaling about 16,700 acres, which are in the Agriculture category (zone) as designated in the Land Use Element of the general plan. There are another approximately 2,100 parcels, totaling about 6,200 acres, which are 10 acres or less in size. These properties, with a range of farming activities, are what are commonly referred to as "ranchettes" or "hobby farms."

As a positive characteristic, these "ranchettes" enable the property owners to engage in some form of agricultural activity. They also allow the residents to experience a rural lifestyle and may enable their children to participate in such activities as 4-H and Future Farmers of America. While these parcels may also provide some amount of transition from urban to production agricultural lands, or function as community separators between the urban areas, these smaller parcels are too small to provide long-term protection of agricultural land resources.



Because these small parcels comprise the greatest interface between urban/suburban uses and production agricultural land uses, they provide the greatest likelihood of leading to incompatibilities between agriculturalists and their suburban or urban neighbors. These parcels have historically presented the largest number of complaints about agricultural practices that make it increasingly difficult to conduct the business of farming. Therefore, a major focus should be on preventing further breakdown of agricultural lands into these types of small ownership patterns.

- \* **Estate planning issues among members of agricultural families, or the necessity of paying estate taxes, are frequently acting as the pressure forcing the sale or parceling of farms.**

The pressure for parceling agricultural lands among heirs can be substantial. There is often the need to be fair to all family members by providing separate and equal interests in the estate, rather than the heirs all sharing an undivided interest in the land. However, property buyers seeking small rural acreages are willing to pay prices for rural homesites that are many times greater than what the land is worth for agricultural purposes. Parceling of the farmland into rural homesites increases the market value of that land measurably, putting further pressure on adjoining or nearby lands to be converted to non-agricultural uses. Those landowners who choose not to convert are affected by the higher selling prices of the converted lands because increased land values result in higher property, gift and inheritance taxes when the farmland is sold or transferred.

- \* **Many of the lands better suited to agriculture are located near urban areas and are experiencing increasing conflicts between agricultural practices and urban neighbors.**

Even though the county has a strong Right-to-Farm ordinance that contains a clear statement that agriculture is a favored use, more people at the urban/agriculture interface leads to more complaints about conventional agricultural practices. As the density of population adjacent to agricultural lands increases, conflicts can arise between farmers who are continuing routine agricultural practices that produce noise, dust or other annoyances for their non-farming neighbors. These complaints, in the long run, can be detrimental to agriculture's ability to remain viable. Therefore, it will continue to be important to maintain a strong agricultural "right-to-farm" ordinance, as well as strong policies that will ensure appropriate buffers between new development and ongoing agricultural operations.

- \* **Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource.**

Water is the life blood of agriculture. Groundwater has been the dominant historical water supply for agriculture in San Luis Obispo County, largely because of its low cost. Changes in agriculture itself (such as a shift from dry farming to grapes) have increased groundwater use. Well permits can be obtained easily by any property owner without well output control. Increased population and the desirability of the county for recreational and tourist-related activities creates still more competition for limited groundwater resources.

San Luis Obispo County has committed itself to a path that requires active preservation of local water supplies, including groundwater and water imported from local reservoirs such as Lopez Lake and Lake Nacimiento. Land use decisions have traditionally focused on surface areas; however, the land's contribution to groundwater and surface water supplies should also be evaluated.

The amount of water that can be harvested in any watershed is a function of the geology, geography, and proximity to water storage facilities (both underground and on the surface). Rather than just focusing on the merits of proposed developments relative to their scale and location, the developments should also be reviewed for their contribution to or degradation of water supplies from a cumulative, watershed perspective. Development that produces impervious surfacing over porous soils or produces silts that clog groundwater recharging stream gravels should be mitigated or redesigned to reduce these impacts. The traditional methods of valuing land and its usage should be expanded to include the optimization of groundwater recharge and surface impoundment.

The effects of land use decisions are not only an issue for agriculture. The effects of the decisions will also have potentially significant effects on the carrying capacity of natural systems, as noted in the discussion of open space issues in chapter 3 of this element. Open space resource such as coastal stream habitats and other sensitive environmental resources throughout the county can be adversely affected if the assessment of water issues is not expanded to look at the larger picture in the context of watershed planning and management.

**\* Agriculture is affected by many aspects of the local, national and international economy.**

Farm debt, fluctuating farm commodity prices, competition in world markets, and operational costs all impact agriculture viability. Diversification and development of uses complementary to agricultural activities may provide opportunities for farmers and ranchers to compete within the agricultural industry, and help to protect agricultural lands for future generations.

**\* While more than half of the agricultural acreage in the county is under Williamson Act conservation contracts, the terms of some of those contracts may not adequately protect agricultural land.**

The county has steadfastly maintained a strong commitment to the Williamson Act program. However, some of the early areawide preserves may not provide sufficient long-term protection of agricultural lands.

The original Edna Valley, Nipomo Valley and Estrella agricultural preserves, and part of the Shandon preserve, have a minimum parcel size of 40 acres. These preserve areas with the 40 acre minimum parcel size total approximately 57,200 acres. The original Adelaida



agricultural preserve, approximately 21,600 acres, has a minimum parcel size of 80 acres. Those parcel sizes may now be too small for properties to sustain long-term agriculture. Under the county's current Rules of Procedure, much of the dry farm or grazing lands in those preserves would currently require a 160 or 320 acre minimum parcel size.

Moreover, early preserve contracts do not prohibit separate sale of existing parcels of record that are smaller than the agricultural preserve minimum parcel sizes. The result could be the sale of individually-owned parcels in these locations for residential purposes.

Clearly, there is no single solution to such a wide range of issues. Nor are the solutions only local ones. Many issues associated with agriculture may only be resolved through policies at the state or national level. However, the county should define its agricultural land use policies in order to protect agricultural land resources for the future.





## **C. AGRICULTURAL GOALS, POLICIES, IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES AND PROGRAMS**

### **INTENT**

Through the following goals, policies, implementation measures and programs, it is the intent of San Luis Obispo County to promote and protect the agricultural industry of the County, to provide for a continuing sound and healthy agriculture in the county, and to encourage a productive and profitable agricultural industry. This can be done by:

1. Supporting increased sales of crops and livestock products produced by farmers, ranchers and processors of food, fiber and flowers in this county;
2. Supporting the efforts of the county's agricultural industry in developing and enhancing domestic and international markets for San Luis Obispo County products;
3. Supporting the creation of value added products and the development of new consumer products; and
4. Supporting long-term productivity and sustainability of the county's farms and ranches by conserving and protecting the soil, water and air which are agriculture's basic resources.

This chapter focuses on the agricultural resources of the county while recognizing that other valuable open space resources such as wetlands, riparian vegetation, or scenic resources can exist on those agricultural lands. Therefore, the goals, policies and implementation measures in this chapter address agriculture first, but also address the protection of open space resources on private lands designated Agriculture by the LUE and this element and on other lands used for production agriculture. Open space resources found on public lands and private non-agricultural lands are addressed in chapter 3, The Open Space Element.

### **AGRICULTURAL GOALS (AG)**

#### **AG1: Support County Agricultural Production.**

- a. Support and promote a healthy and competitive agricultural industry whose products are recognized in national and international markets as being produced in San Luis Obispo County.
- b. Facilitate agricultural production by allowing a broad range of uses and agricultural support services to be consistently and accessibly located in areas of prime agricultural activity.



- c. Support ongoing efforts by the agricultural community to develop new techniques and new practices.
- d. Develop agricultural permit processing procedures that are rapid and efficient. Do not require permits for agricultural practices and improvements that are currently exempt. Keep the required level of permit processing for non-exempt projects at the lowest possible level consistent with the protection of agricultural resources and sensitive habitats.

#### **AG2: Conserve Agricultural Resources.**

- a. Maintain the agricultural land base of the county by clearly defining and identifying productive agricultural lands for long-term protection.
- b. Conserve the soil and water that are the vital components necessary for a successful agricultural industry in this county.
- c. Establish land-use policies in this element that support the needs of agriculture without impeding its long-term viability.

#### **AG3: Protect Agricultural Lands.**

- a. Establish criteria in this element for agricultural land divisions that will promote the long-term viability of agriculture.
- b. Maintain and protect agricultural lands from inappropriate conversion to non-agricultural uses. Establish criteria in this element and corresponding changes in the Land Use Element and Land Use Ordinance for when it is appropriate to convert land from agricultural to non-agricultural designations.
- c. Maintain and strengthen the county's agricultural preserve program (Williamson Act) as an effective means for long-term agricultural land preservation.
- d. Provide incentives for landowners to maintain land in productive agricultural uses.

#### **AG4: Encourage Public Education and Participation.**

- a. Encourage ongoing public education programs by such organizations as the County Department of Agriculture, U.C. Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau and industry organizations, to provide information about agriculture in San Luis Obispo County and help the public better understand the importance of the agricultural industry.
- b. Encourage public participation through the public hearing process in the on-going development of county plans, policies, and ordinances affecting agricultural lands. Utilize the resources of such organizations as the County Agricultural Liaison Board, community advisory groups, and conservation organizations.

#### **AGRICULTURAL POLICIES (AGP)**

The policies to attain the preceding goals are interrelated, therefore, they are addressed under the following headings: use of agricultural lands; resource conservation and management; protection of agricultural lands; and protection of open space resources on agricultural lands. These policies apply primarily to land designated Agriculture on the land use designations map in this element, unless otherwise specified. The policies are intended to be consistent with adopted policies, standards and ordinances of the Local Coastal Program (LCP) and are in addition to all applicable LCP policies, standards and ordinances.

To the maximum extent possible, the following policies, implementation measures and programs try to balance protection of open space resources and the needs of production agriculture, and minimize the impacts to ongoing production agriculture. It is the intent to not require permits for agriculturally-related projects that are currently exempt, and to keep the required level of permit processing for non-exempt projects at the lowest possible level consistent with the protection of agricultural resources and sensitive habitats. The policies and recommended implementation measures apply to discretionary land use permits for new development (see Glossary for definition of development) and proposed land divisions.